

A Minoritarian View of IITK?! **Sudha Bharadwaj**

When I went to IIT Kanpur in 1979 straight after passing Class XIIth in a Central School, I had mixed interests – history, literature and mathematics. No school at that time could have possibly supported such a wild combination so I ended up in the science stream and joined for the 5 year integrated M.S. Math programme. Though my rank (79112) could not possibly have got me any of the coveted Engineering seats, but I can honestly say that Maths was my choice and not merely sour grapes! I also had the background of living in the JNU Campus where my mother was the well-respected founder of an excellent Department of Economics and also a much loved teacher. It was an atmosphere of left, liberal, and progressive ideas, a place of post graduate studies where elections were won on hotly debated political issues and not either gundagardi or indifference, and a very safe place where young men and women mixed freely. There I had already imbibed a sense of social concerns and intellectual freedom and a lifelong affinity to socialistic values. I had also decided at a very young age that I would not grow up in the shadow of a mother I could not possibly expect to compete with – so I was determined not to study Economics and not join JNU either. So when I passed the JEE and could get my favourite subject Maths at IIT Kanpur – just the right distance away from home - I was understandably very excited.

I remember being one of the few students, and a girl at that, arriving all alone at IIT Kanpur to take admission because my mother had undergone a hysterectomy and was still confined to bed. (I was an only child and she an only parent.) But I was made instantly at home in GH (“Girls” Hostel – though most there were grown up women) which I fondly recall as the friendliest place in IITK. Undergrads and Postgrads shared the hostel. Neera and Rama - our student Guides and two years our senior - were really warm and assured us that grades were not everything. The very slight ragging we had was fun, and from the start we had seniors like Shobha Madan and Amrita Tripathi to consult about getting adjusted to the tough, tense and competitive life of an IITKian, particularly as young women. Hostel life was all about desperate last minute “mugging” in “night out” sessions; leaving buckets of soaked clothes to gather fungus; special dinners with most of the paneer out of the “matter paneer” being finished in the first half hour; numerous cups of coffee on the banned electric heaters; and sneaking down the Post Graduate Hostel Hall 4 for a late night meal at 12 o clock. I can still remember the embarrassment when the waiter would shout “Ladies... 4 aloo paranthas” in an effort to locate us, while all heads turned! Our batch and the ones immediately next to ours made a motley group from very different backgrounds. There were Nandini and Anuja from Kenya; the youngest among us - my room mate - the conscientious and studious Uma; the very simple and hard working Lovely who being from a non-English speaking background had to struggle a lot; the casual scatter brained Mathematics wizard Anuradha; the philosophically inclined and very pretty Sudeshna, and the once cheerful Alka who after bravely combating an undiagnosed illness for years, finally, to our shock and sorrow, took her own life.

Most of us students had been used to being outstanding in our respective schools – here we were a drop in the ocean. We were repeatedly told that we were the “cream of the nation” – a mere 2000 selected from lakhs of students all over the country and exhorted to excel. Fortunately I had never been one for coming first, nor was that much an issue in my home so I settled in, concentrating on the subjects I liked and being content with CPIs between 7 and 8. But I know that for many “Chatur Ramalingam”s the first few semesters were agony. One student of our batch went to the extent of slashing his own finger as an excuse out of fear of failing a quiz. The competition was cut throat and in the last semesters, students would go to

the extent of stealing placement invitations from each others mailboxes – even from those of good friends. Fortunately the atmosphere at GH however, was one of mutual co-operation. We were often in each others rooms doing “combined study” and copying “veteran practical logs” which while not very efficient in terms of grades perhaps, made for good friendships and helped keep all of us afloat.

There was something very American about IITK. Right from the names of the lanes in the campus – 36th street, 5th avenue etc and the slang (“quizzes” and “sems”) to the aspirations. Most of my batch did eventually go to the US for further studies, and most of the remaining opted for Management courses. IITK also imbibed the American hatred for anything even slightly “pink”. I remember being shocked to learn that it was because of my left leaning views, that despite my volunteering to be a Student Guide for the freshers, I was not allocated any freshers. Though there were a large number of students from non-English speaking backgrounds particularly among the “phuds” (Ph.D students) – the elitism of the institution was also painfully evident. Many students had to take special English classes to keep apace. I clearly recall a classmate who was brilliant at Maths, but who had a difficult time because of his language problem.

But then, paradoxically, the same elite students of IITK voted for a mostly unlikely President of the Students Senate – Ganesh Bagaria, an avowed Gandhian who wore a white dhoti and khadaus (wooden sandals) to class, though he was studying Nuclear Physics. Students jubiliated when Ganeshji refused a dinner with the Director which was a ritual with the newly elected President, but invited him to his hostel instead! That was democracy for you and a memorable meal the Hostel had! Incidentally, in the stormy 70’s, IITK had had its own crop of left radical students. They unionized the mess workers and other *karmacharis* and also created the Students Senate. Despite many whitewashings the letters painted on the highest water tank in the campus - “Political power flows from the barrel of the gun” using some ingenuous chemical combination would refuse to go away and were still faintly visible when we joined!

Life at IITK, if one wished to perform well was very tough – a grueling succession of weekly quizzes, assignments, mid-sems end-sems, with practical’s thrown in. After a time this meant that learning ceased to be a leisurely, pleasurable, soaking-in of things in depth and became a mad rush. Not everyone could cope. Many had to join “slow pace” classes, repeat papers in the summer and there were hangers on from senior years in our classes. The very first semester I joined I remember being a part of a funeral procession for a dalit student who had committed suicide. He had needed to clear one paper for his degree but he “flunked” it with a narrow margin. In the silent march the grief and anger was palpable under the surface.

For those who decided to learn, rather than bother too much about grades however, our Mecca was the Library. It was really well stocked with a wide range of subjects, and is one of the most memorable things about IITK. Being air conditioned, it was also the most comfortable place in the hot summers of Kanpur and the library staff would go around waking up those who were taking a nap in its various nooks and corners! During exams the Library would be open till 2 am and was overflowing with students.

That is not to say that we did not have some really excellent teachers. Professors Kalyan Bannerji, UB Tewari, AP Shukla, HS Mani, KRK Gandhi.....and so many others, who introduced us to the logical and yet marvelous, complex and intricate and yet rational and comprehensible worlds of physics, chemistry and mathematics. There were many many

classes in which we were surprised when the hour bell rang. Our first two and half years were spent in common courses and we only entered our departments later in the fifth semester. While this made us, the “science” types a little impatient – we had to do Technical Drawing, Electronics and Material Handling classes which were geared for the Engineering students – and this meant we knew much less Mathematics than a B.Sc Maths student would know when they joined us for the two year M. Sc course – but looking back I think it was good for us to “muddy our hands” a bit. We made sand moulds, cut plastic, did woodwork, joined circuits and performed experiments in chemistry with all the others.

Prof VK Deshpande, then on the verge of retirement, took our first Physics 101 course. He was a flamboyant lecturer and excelled in the huge L-7 auditorium where all 250 of us would attend common classes. I remember some of us went to request him to take some special classes on some subject not included in the course – I think on Relativity - and we were fairly confident that most of our classmates would attend. When we assembled for the class we were 7 of us. He laughed at our embarrassment and invited us to his room where we had a very interesting discussion, but it was a lesson for me.

Women were a minority in IITK and a much looked down upon group as were “phuds” and “commies” (leftists). From day one we faced humiliating pranks – the air being taken out of our bicycles leaving us to a walk in the hot sun to our hostel which was predictably the furthest from the academic block; or being caricatured in the skits in the cultural festival; having nasty/ dirty notes left in our books. If you did wellit was because you were a girl and the teachers had a soft corner for you. If you did badly....it was because girls were dumb. The sex ratio in IITK was extremely unhealthy. We were 8 girls among a batch of 250, and mind you, we were considered to be a huge batch of girls – in most batches there were just 2 or 3 girls. In our first semester the 8 of us decided to go and see the Friday night film in the auditorium. We were warned, but we thought we could handle it. In the film the moment a romantic scene was shown, the boys went crazy – catcalls, obscene comments, dances and forcing the operator to project the scene again and again. We walked out after 10 minutes. That was the last Friday night film any one of us saw in all the years we were there.

But once the girls did get back their own. Two girls in the two year M.Sc batch had gone to one of the Halls (I think Hall II) to watch their friends and class mates play tennis. Having done their B. Sc in a college they didn’t think there was anything special about this. But two boys deliberately paraded in the verandah of their upper floor rooms in their underwear in full view of the girls to embarrass them. The girls came back in tears, shocked and humiliated. We were having a GBM in the GH that day and spontaneously decided to take an unusual step. We all marched, maybe 70-80 of us, to Hall II and demanded to see the boys. It was remarkable the way IITK closed ranks against this women’s invasion! The boys were securely locked in and said to be missing, the Warden and Dean of Students arrived but they did not agree to our reasonable demand of a public apology. Later on, in an enquiry into the incident, the girls were told that if they wanted to make their way in the world, they should learn to “face” and “take such incidents in their stride”!

The notes and other unwanted attentions would usually stop after 2-3 semesters, but that was usually because the girls would have paired up with someone by then, and would be perceived as “going steady”, and thus “not available”. Interestingly the otherwise very conservative campus culture was quite liberal with couples who moved around together and visited each others hostels quite openly. Many lasting relationships originated there.

We women would be thoroughly amused by the antics of our male colleagues in the annual “Culfest” – the IITK cultural festival. We would watch suits being pressed and ties being borrowed hectically. Participants would be invited from the Women’s’ Colleges – Miranda House, Lady Shri Ram etc, and their heavy make-up, “dressed to kill” attire and feminine wiles were rather looked down upon by us. Almost as a statement we would insist on being casually dowdy and wisecrack about these “Brainless Beauties” and tease our classmates who would have spent most of their pocket money taking these beauties out to lunch and dinner!

In our IIT course, we had to take an option from the humanities stream each semester. Though the usual attitude of the students to this was one of a “necessary evil”, actually we had some excellent teachers. Profs Mohini Mallik who taught Philosophy of Science, Vinod Jairath who taught Sociology particularly Development Studies, and Leelavati Krishnan who taught Psychology managed to make their mark on the students despite this resistant attitude, and helped in making them more sensitive, more all sided in their outlook and less technocratic.

One of the important features of IITK which is different from Delhi or Mumbai is its sheer isolation. Many IITKians would spend the entire 5 years without even visiting Kanpur city once except for the bus ride from the Railway Station. Kanpur – once a bustling textile town was, by the time we joined, a place where working class families were facing destitution. But at IITK we hardly heard any of this. In fact, most students and faculty were not even concerned with the plight of the construction labour working in the campus, whom we at some point tried to help to get their legal dues.

I joined the NSS at IITK and volunteered to teach in a nearby village and had my first taste of rabid casteism when dalit children did not or rather dared not attend a school we had unknowingly and naively started in an upper caste basti. Later, as a member of a Students Study Circle which was interested in social issues, I visited the Rallis factory in Unnao where workers were killed in a police firing. In this Study Circle, with say 8-10 students and a couple of faculty members, we would discuss serious social issues and those discussions were extremely significant in shaping my life. Two years after my graduation I joined a trade union first as a teacher and then a trade union activist. Today apart from this, I am also a lawyer in the High Court of Chhattisgarh taking up cases of labour, land acquisition and human rights violations.

But, while in IITK, straddling both worlds was a difficult task. One day some of us had gone to visit some flood affected villages and were on our way back to the Campus. I had an end sem exam that day and was extremely tense. We and a large number of villagers were waiting at the roadside for the bus. From a distance we saw it approach raising a huge cloud of dust. We all heaved sighs of relief and expectantly stood up with our all our bags in readiness. To our shock the bus just passed by. The villagers all said down patiently again. I was furious. When will the next bus come? Oh, it comes twice a day, the next one will be in the evening, and I was told with equanimity. Needless to say I failed the exam and did a summer semester. But I never forgot that this was a daily reality for the resigned villagers

Some of my best friends in IITK, apart from the members of our Study Circle, were the mess workers Ramashish and Shubhkaran who had a Cultural Team. I love music and participated with great enjoyment in their songs and plays which were often based on folk tunes and spoke of the hard lot of the working class and peasants. Once I had an occasion to educate my friends in the GH too. It was Special Dinner time and I was Mess Secretary. Some girls came

up and started complaining that their Mess Bill was too much and it was because of pilferage by the Mess workers and even now they were pilfering food. Puran was the worker in charge at the Mess. A young, very dignified man, he was also co-operative to the girls when we had to keep extra plates in our rooms for those who were late. He would always enquire after our health or how our exams went. After every vacation greeting him was a part of arriving at GH. That day I went to the Mess and told Puran about the complaint of the girls. He had tears of anger in his eyes as he opened the kitchen door and showed me that his two young children were sitting on the floor having puris and kheer. Didi, I have given my share to them, how can I eat without them? In the next GBM we decided that for the Special Dinner, just as we could bring our guests, the Mess workers could also bring their families.

IITK in summers was hot, lazy, and relaxed. Usually students who stayed back to repeat courses had just a couple of classes each day. Some of us stayed back to read in the library or just to be with friends. I remember learning cycling – a must in our large Campus - the first summer with the inevitable falls and bruises since I had got quite worn out walking and trying to get lifts. Summers showed the other side of IITK for somewhere in the crevices of the high tension competitive life there was still space and scope for thinking and also being different. IITK also had its classical music lovers, maverick philosophers, rock bands, film buffs, study circles, and I am sure its fair share of druggies.

Our Campus was beautiful and sprawling and no mention of IITK can be complete with the huge army of langurs that lived there. Walking in the open air corridors that joined various academic buildings with each other we would see the langurs sitting on the parapets and swinging their legs in perfect imitation of students, occasionally triumphantly eating some goodie they had just snatched. Once when we were waiting outside our Department Head's room in trepidation, suddenly a langur, who had apparently entered through the window, walked out of his door that was ajar, sending us into splits of laughter. It turned out that the Head was not there. One day, when I visited a friend's room in Hall II with large windows that he had forgotten to close, we were horrified to find a langur sitting on his table squeezing out the last of a tube of shaving cream in sheer delight. Usually friendly and much pampered by the students, the langurs could get violent if their babies were touched, as I came to know from experience.

I loved Mathematics and still remember the sheer joy and philosophical challenge of grasping the concepts of pure mathematics that I learnt at IITK. I also learnt a lot about society, positive and also negative, and decided that I was not an academic. I feel that I have been able to best utilize the knowledge, skills and confidence I acquired in IITK in working with people today.

IITK did put us "through the mill" and give us a stamp of "quality". Even today when people hear that one has graduated from IITK, there are looks of admiration and approval. But sometimes the magic doesn't work. When in the year 2000, a full 16 years after passing out of IITK, I wanted to join a law course at the ripe old age of 40, I was told to get a Transfer Certificate and a Migration Certificate from IITK and also proof that I had passed my graduation with 50% marks. The IITK registry responded promptly, but it was a difficult job persuading the Ravi Shankar University at Raipur that I had passed my B. Sc. with more than 50%!